OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

CONDUCT

OF THE

PROTESTANT DISSENTERS.

N° II.

BY THE

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THERE is a fund of good ſenſe and juſtice in the Engliſh nation, which prevents them from doing wrong, when they have diſcovered what is right. Open, liberal, and ſincere, they may be deceived, but cannot wilfully err. The nobleſt natures are the leaſt addicted to ſuſpicion. But the reſentment of abuſed generoſity is, like a giant refreſhed with wine, tremendous and irreſiſtible. Among all the artifices which deſigning men have employed to inflame the minds of a free people, none have been found ſo uniformly

ſucceſsful as inſinuations that their liberties are either violated or endangered. Jealous of thoſe ſacred rights, which their anceſtors have extorted from tyrants at the expence of their blood, no wonder that they guard them with vigilance, and defend them with enthuſiaſm. The degenerate race, which can baſely ſurrender their freedom, or tamely ſuffer it to be undermined, deſerves thoſe chains which they are doomed to wear;—that infamy with which they will be eternally ſtigmatized. The oppoſite extreme poſſeſſes a double advantage: it is more ſafe, as well as more noble.

But as the beſt things are liable to abuſe, that patriotic principle which glows in every virtuous mind is too often rendered ſubſervient to the private ambition of a factious demagogue. Hence the vindication of rights, and the redreſs of grievances, real or imaginary, have been the pretence of every ſeditious reformer, from *Jack Cade* down to the more modern "*Men of the People.*" Even Cromwell was clamorous in the cauſe of liberty: with what ſincerity, let the annals of his uſurpation tell. Theſe pretenders, though united in one common centre,—ſelf-intereſt,—may be divided into two claſſes, civil and religious; and a third compounded of both. Of the latter only it is my preſent intention to ſpeak.

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That the Diſſenters from the Eſtabliſhed Church may properly be ranged under this deſcription, is a point too obvious to be inſiſted on. Their publications, however foreign the ſubject, however impertinent the digreſſion, always contain ſome oblique remarks, or laboured diſquiſitions on *Civil Liberty*. Even the ſolemn offices of devotion are polluted with theſe unhallowed ſtrains; and the aſſemblies of the *Saints* prophaned by the ſecular language of coffee-houſe politicians. The venerable orator, whoſe dictum is the only human authority to which they feel inclined to bow, though his own eyes may be raiſed to heaven, contrives to fix the hearts of his audience to the earth. In a moment of general joy, when a free and loyal people are preſenting affectionate congratulations to a virtuous Monarch, whom Providence has reſtored to their prayers, he alone, of all mankind, has the contemptuous audacity to ſtep forth with wanton, with premeditated malice, and inſult the royal ear with words that half conceal and half diſcloſe the diſcontent that rankles in his heart. With gratitude equal to his loyalty, he coarſely reprehends that eſtabliſhment to whoſe mildneſs and liberality he is indebted for the liberty he enjoys of diſſeminating his dangerous tenets: and to render his politico-theological compoſition uniform and complete, inſtead of tracing the progreſs of the Goſpel, he traces the progreſs of free-

dom:—inſtead of animating the devotion of his flock by directing their attention to the kingdom of heaven, he reviews the kingdoms of Europe; till at laſt his enamoured diſciple is prepared to hear a voice whiſpering in his ear, "*all theſe things will* "*I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worſhip* "*me!*" To ſhew that the modeſty of this pious divine is at leaſt equal to his other virtues, he declares, that he has "almoſt lived long "enough!" Almoſt! yes, Sir, too long!—too long for the proſperity, the peace, the religion of your country! What a picture have you drawn of expiring ſedition!—ruminating with horrid ſatisfaction on the confuſion he has excited, yet caſting back a longing, lingering look, anxious to ſee the completion of his miſchief.

Among the foremoſt in the ranks of literary adventurers, ſtands another of their chiefs, of equal, but more various, fame. Of him it will be ſufficient to ſay a very few words. His unſettled principles, his fluctuating theology, are pretty generally known; but whatever concluſions we might draw from his writings, no man would probably have been hardy enough, if he had not himſelf declared it, in an hour of convivial confidence, to charge him with a determined reſolution "*of* "*not laying down his pen till he had exterminated* "*from this country the worſhip of* THE IDOL, JESUS "CHRIST." I bluſh to ſtain my page with ſo impious

pious an expreſſion: nor would I have ventured to aſſert it, but from a benevolent wiſh of affording the gentleman alluded to an opportunity of contradicting a report ſo injurious to his character as a Chriſtian and a man. My preſent argument requires not the aid of ſuch an aſſertion. The evidence of his written opinions is ſufficient for my purpoſe, and will prove how much better his mind is adapted to the diſquiſitions of philoſophy, than to the duties of the patriot, or the miniſtry of the Goſpel.

If ſuch be the leaders of a party, what ſhall we ſay of the ſubordinate characters? the *imitatores, ſervum pecus?* With an inveteracy proportioned to their ignorance, they are only leſs dangerous becauſe leſs able. But, however deficient they may be in learning and genius, they are by no means deſtitute of the arts of policy and ſimulation. Perfectly aware of the influence which the lighter productions of the preſs have upon the minds of the people, they have almoſt appropriated to themſelves the direction of every periodical work. By theſe means they ſecure an opportunity of ſtigmatizing whatever militates againſt their favourite ideas, with every opprobrious epithet that the rancour of party-malevolence can ſuggeſt. By a ſkilful application of the words candour and liberality, they prevent the ſuperficial obſerver from diſcovering how little they poſſeſs of thoſe virtues

which

which are the theme of their perpetual encomium. And by artfully arrogating to themſelves the excluſive patronage of civil liberty, they perſuade the thoughtleſs multitude to believe, that freedom has enliſted under the banners of ſchiſm.

Having thus endeavoured to prepoſſeſs the minds of the people in their favour, they have from time to time renewed their attempts to throw down that bulwark which the wiſdom of government has erected to defend the eſtabliſhed religion. A detail of the ſeveral ſteps by which they have proceeded might perhaps be more curious than uſeful. A retroſpect of their paſt conduct is of very little conſequence, except only ſo far as it may tend to illuſtrate their preſent views, and future expectations. Fortunately with reſpect to theſe two points, they have excluded the poſſibility of a doubt. By ſummoning all their powers, and exerting the whole volume of their ſtrength, they have given a public demonſtration, that they regard the preſent period as the grand criſis of their hopes. Active, alert, indefatigable, they have convened in every part of the kingdom. Encouraged by the criminal ſupineneſs of the members of the Eſtabliſhed Church, and by the ſmall majority which appeared againſt them at the laſt diviſion on the repeal of the Teſt Act in the Houſe of Commons, they look forward with confidence to ſucceſs in their enſuing application to Parliament. Not content

with

with boaſting of their own unanimity, and preſſing into their ſervice, by whatever means they could deviſe, every Churchman over whom they had any influence, they have baſely inſinuated, that many of the Clergy of the Eſtabliſhed Church eſpouſed their cauſe: and, had it not been for the exertion of ſome ſpirited individuals at Leeds, the publick might have been impoſed upon by an infamous falſehood. It may afford us ſome conſolation, however, to reflect, that artifice, when detected, is generally fatal to the cauſe in which it is employed.

Practices of this ſort ſeem at laſt to have rouſed the ſlumbering ſpirit of the real friends to the Conſtitution. The Corporation of Oxford have given a proper example upon the preſent occaſion, and couched their inſtructions to their repreſentatives in that ſimple, energetic, and expreſſive language, which the Univerſity they are connected with might be proud to adopt. The liſt of noble names, under whoſe patronage the Warwickſhire meeting is held, affords a ſtrong and pleaſing contradiction to the general lamentations on the degeneracy of the times. This, and ſimilar meetings, ſeem to have excited ſome alarm among the Diſſenters, and have obliged them to have recourſe, once more, to the ſtale arts of miſrepreſentation. But theſe arts will refute themſelves. I turn from them with the contempt they merit.

In

In the proſecution of a cauſe, which is ſupported by the united abilities of three jarring ſects, who were never known to agree in any thing but their hoſtility to the Eſtabliſhed Church, it is remarkable, that they have not been able to ground their pretenſions upon any better foundation than *avarice* and *ambition*:—an unbounded deſire of obtaining "places of truſt, honour, and emolument." Of oppreſſion or intolerance, the moſt querulous of their meetings have not brought forward a ſingle charge. Nor is it leſs extraordinary, that, upon an occaſion when they are eager to decorate their merits in the moſt ſplendid colours, the beſt encomium they can beſtow upon themſelves is, that at the Revolution, and in the two Rebellions of 1715 and 1745, they aſſiſted in the expulſion of a *Popiſh King*, and oppoſed the introduction of a *Popiſh Pretender*. What! are their claims to public favour ſo mean, that they are obliged to make a merit of having merely done their duty; and that too under circumſtances which leave their motives at leaſt equivocal? How far that regard to their own intereſt, which they have uniformly diſplayed, influenced them upon thoſe trying occaſions, I will not pretend to determine. The weakeſt animals know their natural enemy by inſtinct: and ſurely it would have been an act of political ſuicide, for Diſſenters to have ſupported a race of princes who would have employed the very

very firſt efforts of their power to extinguiſh diſſenſion.

Nor are the arguments they draw, from the Teſt not being eſtabliſhed in Ireland and Scotland, better calculated to ſupport their cauſe. In the former country the number of Papiſts alone is computed to be more than double that of all the Proteſtants together: and if to them (the Papiſts) be added the number of Diſſenters, the Church of England will be found to bear a very ſmall relative proportion to the whole. In the latter country, Preſbytery is the eſtabliſhed religion. In either kingdom, therefore, the impoſition of the Engliſh Teſt would be impolitic and improper. Whenever the Proteſtant Diſſenters out-number and out-weigh the preſent Eſtabliſhment in England, they will not only demand, but procure, the repeal of the Corporation and Teſt Acts; and the members of the Church may deem themſelves ſufficiently happy, if, under ſo *auſtere and narrow a government*, they are tolerated in the free exerciſe of private opinion and public worſhip.

One of their writers *, who has diſplayed much more heat than ability, has brought forward the opinions of two eminent prelates to ſupport his cauſe. "Biſhop Burnet," he tells us, "ſaid, in

* See an Advertiſement, ſigned "Verus," in the General Evening Poſt, Jan. 26, 1790.

" the Houſe of Lords, it was hard to turn the " Teſt Act, which was intended againſt Papiſts in " a time of public danger from Popery (1672), " againſt Proteſtant Diſſenters. Biſhop Hoadly " was a great favourer of the repeal, and * fully " refuted the arguments of Biſhop Sherlock on " that ſubject." Of theſe exalted characters, though I am inclined to ſpeak with the reverence due to their ſuperior abilities and ſtation, yet I cannot help remarking, that the enemies of the former triumphed in his † ſervile attachment to a Court;—of the latter, in his want of conſiſtency. I recollect ſomewhere to have ſeen " The opinion " of the Biſhop of Wincheſter contraſted with " that of the *honeſt Ben. Hoadly, M. A.*" Whatever were their real characters, I believe very few of the moſt moderate and moſt able members of the Eſtabliſhment would be willing to take the true principles of the Church upon the authority of thoſe writers. But laying every prepoſſeſſion againſt them aſide, there exiſted reaſons at that time why each of thoſe prelates was deſirous of conciliating the favour of the Diſſenters. In Bur-

* This remains to be proved.

† Of Burnet's imperfect knowledge of the principles of the Conſtitution there cannot be a ſtronger proof than his " Paſtoral Letter," in which he gives King William and Queen Mary a *right* to the crown of theſe realms by *conqueſt!* The book was, by order of the Houſe of Commons, burnt by the hands of the common hangman.

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net's days, the idea of forming a coalition, and receiving the Sectariſts into the boſom of the Church, was extremely prevalent. In Hoadly's time, the ſhorteſt road to eccleſiaſtical honours was ſuppoſed to be through the Meeting-houſe. It is neceſſary, therefore, to receive the opinions of men ſo circumſtanced with extreme caution. Experience has proved, that every hope of reconciling the Diſſenters to the Church is vain and chimerical. The bigotry of Laud, and the mild perſuaſions of more accommodating prelates, were equally unſucceſsful. Yet the candour and liberality of the Sectariſts are the eternal ſubject of modern declamation.

There is an animal in the creation, on whoſe panegyric the fanciful moraliſt ſometimes delights to dwell. To his eye he appears meek, patient, inoffenſive: while to thoſe who are guided by fact, more than ſentiment, the ſame amiable creature appears equally to diſdain the blandiſhments of friendſhip and the rod of power. If you whip him, he ſtands ſtill; if you ſoothe him, he runs backwards. I only draw the ſketch—I leave it to others to find the reſemblance.

In reviewing the conduct of the Diſſenters, there is one point which ſtrikes me as ſingularly inconſiſtent. The Revolution is the great period which they celebrate with peculiar fondneſs; and

with reaſon. They, as well as all other Engliſhmen, ſhould regard it with gratitude and veneration. Yet even in this point they afford room to ſuſpect their ſincerity. The loudeſt applauſe is not always that which proceeds from the heart. At the Revolution, the Teſt act was deliberately eſtabliſhed upon the moſt mature conſideration. That yoke was then impoſed upon their necks, which they now ſo impatiently ſuſtain. It is impoſſible, therefore, that they ſhould be hearty friends to the Conſtitution as it was then eſtabliſhed. Shall we believe him who profeſſes his reſpect for a venerable edifice, at the very moment that he is tearing up its foundations?

But there is another glaring inconſiſtency in their preſent profeſſions. Several of the advertiſements from the provincial aſſemblies aſſure us, that no danger whatever is to be apprehended to the Eſtabliſhment, becauſe we are already in poſſeſſion of all the honours, power, and emoluments, of Church and State. This is begging the queſtion. For the very point at iſſue is, Whether we are to retain them or not? But the Norfolk Meeting have given us another, and probably a more true explanation of the ſort of ſecurity which they promiſe us, in their fifth Reſolution, Nov. 25, 1789. "While "we obſerve," ſay they, "with ſatisfaction, the "juſtice that moſt, even of our opponents, have "done to our political character, we can by no

"means acquieſce in their arguments for the depri-
"vation of our rights, drawn from remote and
"fancied dangers, which might accrue to the Eſta-
"bliſhed Church, if they were reſtored: *for we*
"*hold, that no particular religious Eſtabliſhment is*
"*eſſential to the ſupport of the Britiſh Conſtitution,*
"which, founded as it is upon the conſent of a
"free people, cannot want the aid of Church
"authority!" So frank a confeſſion of a regular deſign to ſubvert *one* branch of the Conſtitution, as ſettled at the Revolution, requires no comment. It explains itſelf better than the moſt laboured paraphraſe can expound it. The ſtrong language in which it is couched, and the peculiar circumſtances of the *Chairman*, who can have no objection to the Teſt in his own perſon, having *twice* ſerved offices of honour and confidence, thoſe of SHERIFF and MAYOR, make it appear at firſt ſight like a forgery to prejudice the cauſe. But as the advertiſement purports that it was reſolved at a numerous meeting, and the reſolution has never been contradicted, we may fairly conclude that ſuch are the real ſentiments of a large body of Diſſenters, with Mr. Elias Norgate at their head.

This reſolution, however, ſtrong as it is, affects only the eccleſiaſtical branch of the Conſtitution. But a meaſure has been adopted, which directly attacks the Civil Eſtabliſhment. Whoever adviſed

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the raſh and illegal ſtep of appointing * *Delegates* from the Diſſenters, to be aſſembled in the metropolis, deſerves to be proſcribed by both parties: by one, as the enemy of the cauſe he attempts to ſupport: by the other, as an enemy to his country. In what page of Magna Charta, or the Bill of Rights, do we find that any particular body of Engliſhmen enjoy a privilege of eſtabliſhing a *third Houſe of Parliament?* An aſſembly, thus illegally and unconſtitutionally appointed, may ſerve as a rendezvous of faction, a general receptacle for malcontents; but what ſalutary effects is it likely to produce? Our liberties it cannot protect; for they are already confided to better hands,—the *legal* repreſentatives of a free people. What then is the object of it? Is it to awe, to intimidate, to controul, the Three Eſtates of the Realm? Is it to aſſume a tribunitian power, and ſuppreſs, by a peremptory *veto*, every meaſure it diſapproves? Or is it intended to *ſimplify* the Conſtitution, and gradually ſteal, or violently force,

* I would earneſtly recommend it to thoſe gentlemen, who may be raiſed to that bad eminence of repreſenting the Diſſenters in their ſelf-created Parliament, to conſider how far their meeting may fall within the meaning of the Riot Act. In the different ſtatutes of the 3d and 4th of Edw. VI. and the 1ſt Mar. ſt. 2. from which ſtatutes that of 1ſt Geo. I. was copied, with large additions, in enumerating and ſpecifying the nature of the riotous meetings they were intended to ſuppreſs, we find expreſs mention made of thoſe whoſe object was "*to change the laws of the realm.*"

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the power from the hands of thoſe to whom the wiſdom of our anceſtors, and our own ſuffrages, have intruſted it, and lodge it in the hands of a *factious ariſtocracy?* I truſt, the great maſs of the people are too well apprized, and too fully ſenſible, of the bleſſings they enjoy under the preſent form of government, to ſuffer it to be violated with impunity. I truſt, whenever the time arrives, that the repreſentatives of the Commons ſhall be ſent back, to collect the ſentiments of their conſtituents, every free-born, every independent Engliſhman will ſhew a *marked contempt* to thoſe members who have ſupported, and a *decided preference* to thoſe who have reſiſted, ſo dangerous an infringement of their rights, ſo daring a violation of the *principles of the glorious Revolution.*

When a powerful, an opulent, and a reſtleſs ſect meet in an illegal manner, for the expreſs purpoſe of avowing and ſupporting unconſtitutional principles, it becomes the duty of every man, who loves his country, to uſe his utmoſt endeavours to check the firſt ſymptoms of that fermentation, which ſuch practices are calculated to raiſe. It is a decided maxim in politics, that *whoever aſſembles the people, excites a commotion.* Even the Proteſtant Aſſociation, obſcure in its origin, and contemptible in its leader, terminated in riot, in bloodſhed, and in rapine. In a free country, interference on the part of government would

would be dangerous, unconſtitutional, ineffectual. Hence individuals are called upon to exert double energy. In every private company, in every public aſſembly, the good citizen ſhould ſtand forward, to oppoſe the deſigns, and combat the arguments, of the enemies of the Conſtitution. Firm and undaunted, let him neither be intimidated by inſult, nor duped by flattery. Let him remember, that the ſmiles of ſome men are more fatal than their ſwords; that improvident people hear their generoſity extolled, only while they have ſomething to give; and are derided for their folly, when they have nothing to beſtow. Let the friend of freedom look round the world, and tell in what kingdom, in what republic, the people enjoy a larger portion of civil liberty, a milder government, more equitable laws? Is it under the jarring and ſtill uncemented confederacy of the American States? Is it under the crude and complicated maſs of the new French conſtitution? Is it under the intolerant Popery of Brabant,—under the inquiſitors of Venice,—or in the Raſp-houſes of Holland! When he has finiſhed that reſearch, let him go one ſtep farther. Let him examine the hiſtory of this country with the moſt minute and rigid attention. Let him compare the different æras from the Conqueſt to the preſent time: and, when he has cloſed his enquiries, let him tell at what period public credit and national character ſtood higher; when commerce was more extended;

literature

literature and ſcience more liberally encouragd; and the *rights of man* better underſtood, or more amply enjoyed.

What then can the Patriot gain by undermining the preſent Conſtitution? He, whoſe intereſt, whoſe happineſs, whoſe glory, is that of his country? Who, in the language of the poet, "burns with "one love, with one reſentment glows?" This is the true Patriot. Not he, whoſe private principles are repugnant to any *one* branch of the Conſtitution. Not he, who when his country triumphs over the common foe, ſullen, gloomy, and malignant, retires to conceal the chagrin he is aſhamed to avow. Not he, who in the hour of public calamity and diſgrace comes forward from his concealment ſerene and ſatisfied; or broods with ſavage joy over the unfortunate victims, whoſe lives have been ſacrificed at the ſhrine of national honour. Not he, whoſe religion, cold, ſceptical, and fluctuating, has more of the ſerpent than the dove; and whoſe deſperate ambition is reſolved to ruin or to rule.

FINIS.